

Evaluation Report Brief

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation: Connected Youth Initiative

What is the community challenge?

Unconnected youth are young people who have, and continue to face, adverse circumstances that put them at reduced odds for experiencing a positive and healthy adult life. These young adults might find themselves not connected to a positive life course because they are, or have been, in the Nebraska foster care system; have had contact with child protective services; have had juvenile justice system involvement; and/or have experienced homelessness or near homelessness. They are also unconnected from permanent family and community support. They need a support network within their community to assist them in their transition to adulthood.

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Connected Youth Initiative (CYI)

Intermediary: Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

Focus Area(s): Youth Development

Focus Population(s): Unconnected young adults ages 14-24

Communities Served: six community collaboratives covering 40 counties across rural Nebraska

What is the promising solution?

The Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) uses a collective impact approach to create systems change in rural Nebraska communities and serves people aged 14 to 24 through the following essential Connected Youth Initiative elements: [1] opportunities for youth leadership and advocacy; [2] a financial literacy and asset-building program; [3] support services funds for young adults to access an array of basic needs services and supports in emergency instances, such as housing (ex: rent, utilities), employment (ex: uniform), daily living (ex: food), physical/mental/dental healthcare (ex: copay), education (ex: textbooks, fees), parenting (ex: childcare), and/or transportation (ex: car repairs); and [4] goal-oriented coaching to develop skills and access services and support self-sufficiency in transition to adulthood. All CYI elements are set within a community-based collaborative system. Ultimately, the objective of CYI is to realize positive outcomes for participating young people across seven main domains: education, employment, permanence, housing, health, transportation and economic stability.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

As a grantee of CNCS's Social Innovation Fund (SIF), Nebraska Children and Families Foundation engaged in an independent evaluation of CYI. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation partnered with WestEd to complete the evaluation, which began in 2015 and finished reporting in 2019. The goals of the evaluation were to demonstrate the impacts of the CYI model and to understand implementation in a rural context. Using a quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching, the impact evaluation sought to answer the following primary research question: to what extent does CYI improve overall well-being for the young people who participate compared to similar young people who do not participate? To answer this question, young adults provided information regarding the seven domains mentioned above via surveys collected at several points throughout the study. Overall, 418 young adults were included in the impact study with follow up data examined at a first (approximately 7.5 months) and last follow up period, when possible. The implementation evaluation utilized a combination of detailed, individual-level program data and semi-structured interviews with collaborative and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation staff to understand implementation variances, contextual factors, and influences of a collective impact approach, among other lines of inquiry.

What did the evaluation find?

The impact evaluation found that CYI achieved multiple positive outcomes for young people who engaged with programming and services. Overall, CYI participants are statistically more likely to report:

- More safe and stable living situations,
- Greater financial stability,
- Increased perceived hope, and
- Decreased emergency care utilization.

The implementation evaluation found that young adults engaged with the CYI through 16 different types of combinations, though coaching was the most common component utilized across all. At a systems-level, staff indicated that setting the CYI model within a collaborative infrastructure often generated greater awareness and understanding of the unconnected youth population within the community.

Notes on the evaluation

Due to Congressional sun setting of SIF appropriations, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation was not able to complete data collection as originally planned. The impact study period was cut short by over a year and resulted in a smaller than expected study sample and fewer follow up data points. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation supplemented the reduced evaluation budget to maintain the described evaluation design for the duration of the evaluation period reported here.

Study limitations. The study sample was not equivalent at baseline with regard to the ages of participants across the two groups, and also suffered from attrition bias. Even with analytic adjustments, a baseline imbalance greater than SD .25 means that it is not possible to determine with confidence whether the reported positive findings are in fact due to program participation, or whether they might be due to participant age. Young adults in the treatment group were significantly younger than young adults in the comparison group, which might be a possible explanation for some of the observed differences.

How is Nebraska Children and Families Foundation using the evaluation findings to improve?

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation continued to implement the Connected Youth Initiative with SIF support through March 2020 and is working with subgrantees to sustain CYI elements within the community collaborative systems they have built moving forward. The evaluation surfaced numerous learnings, and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation plans to prioritize the following as it considers improvements alongside its community partners:

- Emphasis on the unconnected youth population within the community collaborative infrastructure,
- Meaningful engagement of young adults throughout the evaluation process, and
- Potential adaptations in CYI implementation across urban and rural settings.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Implementation Study and Impact Evaluation using a quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching

Study Population: Unconnected young adults aged 14-24

Independent Evaluator: WestEd

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Moderate

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.